

PIPE STORAGE AND INVENTORY CONTROL CHEST

BACKGROUND OF THE INVENTION

- [1] The present invention relates to a raw materials storage chest, and more particularly to inventory control and dispensing of valuable plumbing materials.
- [2] Unfortunately, theft at job sites may be common. Theft of relatively expensive raw materials such as lengths of pipe is quite common. Oftentimes raw materials are located on a job site and employees simply draw whatever quantities are required for the job. This availability of raw materials permits an employee to simply take more materials than required for the present job and utilize the raw materials for personal or other projects.
- [3] Plainly, the loss of raw materials increases the overall cost of a job and may increase the difficulty of tracking inventories.
- [4] Accordingly, it is desirable to provide storage of valuable raw materials which minimizes theft and simplifies inventory management.

SUMMARY OF THE INVENTION

- [5] The materials storage chest system according to the present invention stores and selectively dispenses pipe such as brass pipe in response to a controller that selectively limits access thereto.
- [6] An input device receives information from an employee such as employee number, job numbers, and a desired quantity of material. A material dispensing opening dispenses the materials from within the chest to a materials receiving basket in response to the controller. The material dispensing opening prevents access to the chest other than through the controller. The materials receiving basket provides an accessible temporary storage for the employee receiving a relatively large quantity of materials at one time.
- [7] A communication system provides for communication between the controller and a remote location to simplify inventory management and alert re-supply operators such that the system will consistently contain an adequate material supply.
- [8] The present invention therefore provides storage of valuable raw materials which minimizes theft and which simplifies inventory management.

BRIEF DESCRIPTION OF THE DRAWINGS

- [9] The various features and advantages of this invention will become apparent to those skilled in the art from the following detailed description of the currently preferred embodiment. The drawings that accompany the detailed description can be briefly described as follows:
- [10] Figure 1 is a general perspective view of a pipe storage chest according to the present invention;
- [11] Figure 2 is a front view of another pipe storage chest according to the present invention;
- [12] Figure 3 is a front view of another pipe storage chest according to the present invention;
- [13] Figure 4 is a block diagram of one embodiment of a controller;
- [14] Figure 5A is side view of the pipe storage chest illustrating a material dispensing opening in a first position;
- [15] Figure 5B is side view of the pipe storage chest illustrating a material dispensing opening in a second position; and
- [16] Figure 6 is a schematic representation of a communication system for the storage chest according to the present invention.

DETAILED DESCRIPTION OF THE PREFERRED EMBODIMENT

- [17] Figure 1 illustrates a general perspective view of a materials storage chest system 10. The system 10 preferably stores and selectively dispenses pipe such a brass pipe of predetermined lengths, however, it should be understood that other relatively expensive raw materials will also benefit from the present invention.
- [18] The system 10 includes a storage chest 12, a material dispensing opening 14 and a controller 16 which selectively actuates the material dispensing opening 14 to dispense a quantity of material contained within the chest 12. The chest 12 is of a size and shape to contain a significant quantity of material M and is weather proof so as to protect the materials contained therein.

- [19] The chest 12 includes a top loading door 11t for top loading (Figure 2) and/or a side loading door 11s (Figure 3). The loading door 11 is a secured door that is lockable to prevent access other than by authorized persons. The loading door 11 provides for loading of large quantities of materials M independent of the dispensing opening 14. A side loading door 11s is particularly desirable when a multiple of chests are stacked to provide, for example only, a multiple of pipe lengths in a single location (Figure 3).
- [20] Referring to Figure 4, the controller 16 includes a computer module 24 which is connected to an employee interface 26 including input and output devices. Preferably, the controller 16 is weatherproof. The employee interface 26 includes a display 28, such as a high resolution LCD or flat panel display. The interface 26 also includes input devices 30, preferably a plurality of buttons and directional keypad, but alternatively including a mouse, keyboard, keypad, remote device or microphone. Alternatively, the display 28 can be a touch screen display.
- [21] The input device receives identification information from an employee such as employee number, job numbers, or the like. The controller 16 also receives requests from the employee for a particular quantity of material. That is, the controller 16 provides the security and authorization to actuate the material dispensing opening 14.
- [22] The computer module 24 includes a CPU (illustrated schematically at 32) and storage device 34 connected to the CPU 32. The storage device 34 may include a hard drive, CD ROM, DVD, RAM, ROM or other optically readable storage, magnetic storage or integrated circuit. The storage device 34 contains a database (illustrated schematically at 36) including a detailed sequence of material dispensing information and the related employee identification information.
- [23] Referring to Figure 5A, the material dispensing opening 14 dispenses the materials M from within the chest to a materials receiving basket 20. The material dispensing opening 14 preferably includes a rotational door 22 which rotates a single piece of material from within the chest 12 into the material receiving basket 20 in response to the controller 16. That is, each revolution of the rotating door 22 delivers a single piece of material (Figure 5B). The rotational door 22 may be actuated in any conventional manner such as by an electric motor E or the like which rotates the rotational door 22. It should be understood that

other delivery system will likewise benefit from the present invention such as, for example only, a system which operates in a manner like a can dispensing machine mechanism.

[24] The material dispensing opening 14 prevents access to the chest 12 other than through the controller 16. It should be understood that the term basket is to be construed broadly and includes any device which holds a quantity of material M which has been released from the chest 12. The materials receiving basket 20 provides an accessible temporary storage for the employee which may be particularly useful for a receiving a relatively large quantity of materials at one time.

[25] Referring to Figure 6, a communication system 24 provides for communication between the controller 16 and a remote location R such as a home office re-supply operator or the like. The communication system 24 is preferably wireless such as through cellular communication systems or the like. The controller 16 preferably stores the employee inputted information and periodically send the stored information to the remote site R so as to simplify inventory management and alert re-supply operators such that the system 10 will provide adequate material supply.

[26] The foregoing description is exemplary rather than defined by the limitations within. Many modifications and variations of the present invention are possible in light of the above teachings. The preferred embodiments of this invention have been disclosed, however, one of ordinary skill in the art would recognize that certain modifications would come within the scope of this invention. It is, therefore, to be understood that within the scope of the appended claims, the invention may be practiced otherwise than as specifically described. For that reason the following claims should be studied to determine the true scope and content of this invention.